

Working from Home ... For Yourself or Someone Else?

By Elena Fawkner

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Although many people badly want to work from home, not everyone wants to have to launch and run a fully-fledged business of their own in order to do so. For such people the desire to work from home is more about maximizing time to be with family, physical location, comfort and convenience than it is about entrepreneurship.

If this is you, telecommuting may be the answer you've been looking for.

WHAT IS TELECOMMUTING EXACTLY?

For our purposes, telecommuting simply means an employee is working from a location other than the employer's premises. Usually it means the employee is working from home, performing the same functions that he or she would otherwise be doing in the employer's office.

ADVANTAGES OF TELECOMMUTING

The advantages of telecommuting are many.

= For the Employee

For parents with young(ish) children, perhaps the greatest benefit of telecommuting is the increased time available to spend with family. Note, though, that one of the greatest myths about telecommuting is that it means you can do away with daycare. That's true for only a very few, very lucky individuals. Instead, think in terms of time saved commuting to and from

your offsite job. THAT is the time you get back. Not your entire working day.

Financial considerations are also a strong reason to work from home. Think of what you can save on gas, clothing and eating out.

Other advantages of telecommuting for employees include:

- = Improved productivity (fewer distractions and interruptions).
- = Helps balance work and family life.
- = Greater flexibility in hours and geographic location.
- = Recovery of commuting hours (just think what you could do with the equivalent of over six working weeks a year, assuming you commute an hour a day).
- = Fewer daytime home break-ins.
- = Environmental considerations (fewer cars on the road means less pollution and fewer accidents).
- = Fairer performance appraisals (you're evaluated purely on the quality of your work and your output, not merely the number of hours clocked at the office).
- = Elimination of commuting aggravators (such as obnoxious drivers, traffic snarls and other frustrations).
- = General stress reduction.
- = Improvement in morale, job satisfaction and motivation.
- = No need to relocate.
- = Can open work opportunities for the disabled.

= For the Employer

Advantages for employers in allowing telecommuting include:

- = Saving of parking and office space costs.
- = Increases in employee productivity (20% on average).
- = Reduces absenteeism.
- = Reduces business interruptions due to natural emergencies (if there's a snowstorm business still gets done by employees at home).
- = The employer becomes an employer of choice, attracting high quality employees.
- = Reduced staff turnover due to improved job morale and satisfaction.
- = An expanded pool of employee talent to choose from since no geographical limitations are imposed.
- = In some states tax credits may be available.
- = No relocation costs to be paid on behalf of employees.
- = The whole office doesn't come down sick from one employee spreading the flu.

DISADVANTAGES OF TELECOMMUTING

Of course, there are two sides to every coin and telecommuting

is no different, bringing its share of disadvantages for both employee and employer, including:

= For the Employee

= Coworker envy (there may be some jobs in your organization that don't lend themselves to telecommuting).

= Reduced social interaction with coworkers may lead to professional isolation.

= Possibly fewer promotional opportunities (out of sight, out of mind).

= Potential for longer hours (try and keep work and personal time separate).

= Reduced IT support (who's going to fix your computer?).

= Potential for distractions (young children, TV, refrigerator).

= Too-frequent fridge and coffee breaks.

= Can become a work addict.

= For the Employer

= Morale problems in staff holding positions not suited to telecommuting.

= Startup operating costs (equipment, training etc.).

= IT support costs.

= Management resistance and skepticism (who needs suspicious, distrustful managers as employees though, right?).

= Difficulties in coordinating and monitoring performance of remote workers.

= Security of information and files when allowing remote workers access to company computer systems.

= Employee health and safety issues.

= Can disrupt teamwork and organizational culture.

The advantages and disadvantages for individual employees and employers will vary case by case. Both you and your employer need to weigh the above factors when deciding whether telecommuting is a viable option in your particular circumstances.

WHAT TYPE OF WORK IS SUITED TO TELECOMMUTING?

As for what type of work is suited to telecommuting, basically anything that doesn't demand your physical presence at office goes. You must, however, have a boss who is capable of measuring results and quality of work, not just hours worked.

WHAT TYPE OF PERSON(ALITY) IS SUITED TO TELECOMMUTING?

The qualities needed in a telecommuter are similar to those needed of an entrepreneur. Among other things, you need to be:

= a self-starter

- = independent
- = motivated
- = self-disciplined
- = good with time management
- = organized.

FINDING TELECOMMUTING POSITIONS

How do you go about finding a telecommuting position?

Well, if you're already in the workforce, and your job is one that could just as easily and effectively be done at home, make a proposal to your boss that you start telecommuting one or two days a week and gradually increase the number of days you work from home as you prove to your boss (and yourself) that telecommuting is a good solution for both of you.

If you're not already in the workforce or your position is not one that can be performed from home, you'll need to actively source a position that can. Good old research, letter writing, phone calls and pavement pounding will be required.

To begin with, inventory your skills and experience. Then determine what kinds of positions you can do, for example, data entry, telemarketing, customer service, transcription, web design, accountant, lawyer etc. Then grab the yellow pages and list the businesses that may require the skills you possess. Approach them either in writing (enclosing a copy of your resume) or by telephone.

If telecommuting is a new concept for your prospective employer, but everything else about the position seems to be right, consider taking the job as a regular position first to prove yourself then move into telecommuting gradually. For some useful starting points for finding a telecommuting position, see:

<http://telecommuting.about.com/msub3.htm> (for administrative positions)

<http://telecommuting.about.com/cs/joblistings/> (for contract/freelance positions)

<http://telecommuting.about.com/cs/jobscomputer/> (for computer-related positions)

<http://telecommuting.about.com/cs/jobswriting/> (for positions involving writing).

OTHER ISSUES

OK, so what other issues do you need to think about?

= Children

If you have young children, you may be thinking of telecommuting as an alternative to day care. Although some telecommuting positions lend themselves to working around your children's schedule, the majority don't. The fact that you're working from home does not necessarily mean you get to work when you want. If you have a job that requires you to effectively work a 9 to 5 workday, then you're going to need to make accommodations for children that require constant direct supervision.

Once your children are a little older and start school, life gets a lot easier but when you have preschoolers running underfoot, you're going to have a challenge so know what you're getting yourself into.

To make things as easy as possible, establish a schedule and routine for yourself and kids. Include in your schedule the work you must do for your job, any household chores that need to be attended to and time with kids. In fact, why not get the kids to help with the chores?

Also, don't let friends, family or neighbors eat into your time. Make sure they (and you!) understand that although you may be home you are not available for social activities - you are WORKING. Spell it out if you have to.

The same goes for personal telephone calls. Either get caller ID with voicemail so you can screen personal calls and return them at a convenient time or get a second line - one for home and one for work.

In terms of boundaries, remember that as far as your kids are concerned, you're just mom (or mum) or dad to your kids and if you're at home they expect you to be available to them, on tap. Help them to understand that you have a life outside of the home and to relate to you as an independent, professional person (as well as mom or dad) who just happens to be around the house more than usual.

Also, don't expect too much of your kids. They are kids after all. In particular, don't expect them to be quiet and well-behaved just because you have to work. Try and locate your office somewhere away from the kids if noise is a problem. But if they're very young and need constant supervision (and your work will accommodate this level of attention), just childproof everything as best you can. Otherwise daycare is your friend.

= Office Space

Obviously, having an area where you can work productively is crucial. You don't need to spend a fortune setting up an elaborate office. If you have a spare room, great, use it as

your office provided it's suitable. But if you don't, an unused corner of the living room or the kitchen or dining table will do in a pinch too. Make sure that whatever area you choose has good (preferably natural) lighting.

Also (and this is from personal experience), don't try and use a laptop full-time even though they take up conveniently little space. They're not designed for that. Make sure you have an area big enough to house a desk that will take a desktop monitor and keyboard. Keep your laptop for traveling or emergencies.

To furnish your office inexpensively, visit second hand stores, auctions, office furniture resellers, garage sales etc. as well as your local newspaper classifieds to find furniture.

= Equipment

The equipment you need (and your employer may well provide some or all of it) will depend on the nature of your work but if it's a typical office position, you'll need:

- = Two telephone lines - one for personal use and one for business (including voice and fax capability).
- = A fast Internet connection - cable or DSL is a must!
- = A two-line speaker phone with rolodex.
- = State-of-the-art computer (or the best you can afford -- the best are not that expensive these days fortunately).
- = Fast laser printer.
- = Fax machine.
- = Answering machine and/or voice mail.
- = Tape or CD backup .
- = Power surge protector.

You are going to be using a lot of juice with all this stuff so make sure your electrical circuit system can handle it. If in doubt, get an electrician in.

Telecommuting offers a bridge for those who need or want to work for someone else but just don't want to have to leave the house to do it. Finding a telecommuting position if you're not already in a job that lends itself to such a working arrangement will probably not be easy but it's worth persevering. If you need to work for a time in a position before raising the issue, do so. After all, telecommuting is not necessarily a job in itself. Rather, it can be a privilege you can earn by proving yourself to be a dependable and reliable worker in the traditional workplace first.

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